

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 083 506

CG 008 366

AUTHOR Franklin, Clyde, W., Jr.; Michalowski, Raymond, Jr.
TITLE Empathy: Affective or Objective?
PUB DATE [71]
NOTE 17p.
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Affective Behavior; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Skills; Definitions; Emotional Development; *Empathy; Nonverbal Communication; Social Psychology; *Verbal Ability

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the premise that one concept in social psychology which lacks conceptual clarification is "empathy" or "empathic understanding". The purpose of this paper is conceptually to clarify the term, and to discuss the implications of this clarification for research and theory in sociology and social psychology. This, hopefully, will stimulate the development of reliable and consistent measures of empathy, and alleviate the lack of correspondence which presently exists between the nominal and operational definitions of the concept. The author submits the idea that empathy is affectively neutral. The paper suggests that empathy occurs as an independent cognitive process, and whether or not this process results in affectively-neutral behavior is a function of additional variables. The paper goes on to define other concepts such as sympathy and effective communication. (Author/WSK)

ED 083506

Empathy: Affective or Objective?

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by

Clyde W. Franklin, Jr.

and

Raymond Michalowski, Jr.

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EMPATHY: AFFECTIVE OR OBJECTIVE?

Currently, there is some concern among sociologists and social psychologists over the problem that many concepts in the literature are characterized by vagueness, inconsistency in usage and in general, inadequate imagery. These deficiencies in concept formation have prompted some writers to suggest that less emphasis should be placed on theory construction and testing, and more energy should be devoted to imagery building.¹ Regardless of one's predisposition toward theoretical and research strategies to be utilized in sociology and social psychology, it is abundantly clear that inadequate conceptualization in these disciplines is inimical to the scientific process.

One such concept in social psychology which lacks conceptual clarification is "empathy" or "empathic understanding." The purpose of this paper is to conceptually clarify the term, and to discuss the implications of this clarification for research and theory in sociology and social psychology. Hopefully, this will stimulate the development of reliable and consistent measures of empathy, and alleviate the lack of correspondence which presently exists between the nominal and operational definitions of the concept.

Nominal Definitions of Empathy

As early as 1955, Cronbach and Gage reported that while various attempts were being made to measure empathy, these attempts were often characterized by "barely enough conceptual analysis to provide some scientific respectability to their reports". Their concern appears to be justified if one views the development of the concept.

In 1948, Dymond nominally defined empathy as the "imaginative transporting

of one's self into the thinking, feeling and acting world of another, so structuring the world as he does." This definition has been utilized by many investigators in their conceptual and empirical work.² Diverging slightly from Dymond's position, Hastorf and Bender in 1951 suggested that empathy appeared to be more objective, more cognitive and more truly perceptual in nature. These authors, however, reverse themselves in 1953 by implicitly accepting Dymond's definition as an instance of "raw" empathy.³ Tobolski and Kerr (1952) apparently accepted Dymond's nominal definition as did more recent researchers using the empathy concept (Hobart and Falberg, 1965; Goodman and Ofshe, 1968).

A concept which bears close resemblance to empathy is that of role-taking. "Taking the role of the other" as conceived by Mead (1935) and later expanded by sociologists such as Turner (1956) and Blumer (1969) suggests a cognitive process entailing an assessment of what is in the "other's" mind. Such a process allegedly allows the individual to respond to himself from other's perspective, thus facilitating the use of significant gestures and thereby enhancing communication between "actor" and "other." It is interesting to note at this point, however, that for Mead, "gestures become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in (the) individual making them the same responses they explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals (Mead, 1934)." Thus, role-taking as initially conceived by Mead was implicitly linked to affectivity.

Due to the fact that role-taking and empathy have been used interchangeably in the literature, we are inclined to feel that no useful distinction can be made between these two concepts on the basis of past work in sociology and social psychology. This inter-changeability is quite obvious if one examines, operational definitions of both empathy and role-taking.

For example, Stryker's (1962) measure of "role-taking" is remarkably similar to the "predictive test" frequently used as a measure of empathy.⁴

One difficulty with past conceptualizations of empathy has resulted from a failure to distinguish between empathy and the behavior to which it gives rise. Such a view of empathy would suggest that a number of conditional and intervening variables play crucial roles in the relationship between empathy and resultant behavior. In order to explicate this relationship, it is necessary to posit two stages of empathy.

Empathy in social interaction first occurs when an individual role-takes in an effort to determine what an "other" means by his symbolic gesture. This process is cognitive and made possible because individuals share symbols and is characterized, in its pure form, by affective neutrality. We suggest the nominal concept, preliminary empathy for this process.

A second stage of empathy is characterized by the individual considering what response to "other's" symbol will best produce the result desired and is labeled secondary empathy. In this stage of the empathic process the individual actor judges and weighs the effects of various responses in an effort to determine which one will be most productive of the goals he intends for the interaction. (Blumer, 1969)

The distinction between preliminary and secondary empathy is a distinction between the functions of empathy, not a distinction between two unique processes. In both cases cognitive identification is crucial for the empathic process, and affectivity is not an original element of the empathic process.⁶ However, positive or negative affect may interact with preliminary empathy in such a way as to make difficult the process whereby one considers alternative responses to other's symbols. On the other hand, a social situation involving actor and other may be characterized by the stage of preliminary empathy and affective neutrality. In this case, actor attempts to determine the meaning

of a symbolic gesture devoid of affect. We suggest that when this occurs, actor can determine alternative responses with less difficulty. Succinctly:

Postulate 1: Given preliminary empathy in social interaction, an increase in actor's positive or negative affect for other reduces the likelihood of successful secondary empathy in social situations including other.

Because secondary empathy is linked directly with behavioral response, increases or decreases in the process should have direct implication for response emission. This notion is considered later.

Empathy and Other Concepts

Empathy and Sympathy

We have submitted the idea that empathy is affectively neutral. Yet this does not obviate the existence of affectively-laden behavioral responses in social interaction. It does suggest, however, that empathy occurs as an independent cognitive process, and whether or not this process results in affectively-neutral behavior is a function of additional variables.

Sympathy is one behavioral response which can result from a concurrence of empathic understanding with additional variables. In everyday parlance, it is assumed that sympathy refers to some type of affect felt by one person for another. This affect is generally perceived in one of two ways: (1) the other's experience of a particular affect stimulates the actor to experience the identical affect - thus, if my friend is sad because his mother died, I am sad because my friend is sad.

The first definition of sympathy, "feeling exactly what the other is feeling" is theoretically antithetical to present social psychological theory despite the fact that empathy has been defined in similar terms. The rationale for this assertion is that sympathetic interaction with other is characterized by a reaction to some problem experienced by other and a

reaction to other. Therefore, the affect experienced by actor cannot be the same as the affect experience by other. Actor is reacting to two sources of stimuli while other is reacting to one source of stimulus. If actor and other were reacting to the same problem alone, it is possible that they would experience similar affect, however, such a situation would be void of the interaction connotation applied to the term "sympathy."

The second definition of sympathy, "that actor is stimulated by the affective experience of other to experience some complementary affect," is somewhat more compatible with social psychological theory. The implication is that actors feels for other, instead of as other feels. Thus, sympathy is defined as empathy plus affectivity and some resultant behavior. It is further important to note that behaviors which are assumed to indicate "sympathy" are in actuality reinforcing behaviors. An individual is considered "sympathetic" when he agrees with, i.e., reinforces, the beliefs, attitudes or perceptions of an "other." If one individual disagrees with another, no one would think to identify the disagreeer as "sympathetic."

In other words, sympathy is a particular type of behavioral response which ensues as a consequence of interaction between empathy and affectivity. To claim that sympathy exists as a motivating factor on the basis of observing sympathetic behavior is pure tautology. Sympathy is not a motivation it is a behavior which comes about as a consequence of unsuccessful secondary empathy which may be the result of positive or negative affect. Obviously the implications for behavior will vary according to affect-type-interaction with preliminary empathy which affects secondary empathy. A second postulate can now be stated.

Postulate 2: A decrease in successful secondary empathy by actor increases the likelihood of an actor emitting sympathetic or negative behaviors toward "other."

Empathy and Communication

Mead (1934) contended that in order to communicate, one must be able to anticipate the response one's symbol will elicit from another. This is accomplished by assuming the role of the other. However, Goodman and Ofshe in their work (1968) state initially that empathy is a function of the communication process, but then conclude the opposite-that empathy is necessary for communication (pp. 597, 600). (This is just one example of the nature of the confusion surrounding the relationship between empathy and communication.)

The nature of the relationship between empathy and communication is obscured by the conflicting connotations of empathy and the divergent meanings of "effective" communication. The term "effective communication" is used with one of two possible implications.

Communication I: The first type of "effective communication is related to the recognition of symbolic gestures, i.e. the objective, cognitive awareness of what the other actually intends by his symbol. The implied direction of communication type I is from other to actor in that it concerns actor's ability to correctly interpret onther's gestures.

Communication II: The second type of "effective" communication is related to the "good will" one experiences when he perceives the other with whom he is interacting understands his gestures. This perceived understanding, or lack of it, is not related to the actual, cognitive recognition of his gestures. Rather, it is the consequences of the reinforcement or punishment the individual receives as a direct result of his gestures. This approach to "effective" communication is epitomized by the statement that, "If you truly understand me, you will, of course, agree with me." The implied direction of communication type II is from actor to other since it concerns actor's response to other's gesture. The individual perception of effective communication will be a direct function of the reinforcement or punishment his gestures elicit from other.

This dual definition of communication confuses the relationship between empathy, communication and behavior. A salesman's success in selling cars may very well be operationalized as an indicator of successful communication (Tobolski and Kerr, 1952). However, it is presently unclear whether this "successful communication" means (1) the salesman's ability to accurately perceive the buyer's symbolic gestures as Tobolski and Kerr indicate or (2) the salesman's ability to make the other feel, through effective reinforcement, that he accurately perceived other's gestures even when he did not, as is suggested by Turner (1966) or (3) some interaction of both 1 and 2.

More specifically, it is our contention that while empathy can result in either type of communication, intervening variables may occur and change both the nature of actor's resultant behavior and other's perception of that behavior. Moreover, if the intent in social interaction is socio-emotionally oriented, behaviors which indicate successful preliminary empathy may not be perceived as productive of socio-emotionality. Contrastingly, if the intent in social interaction is goal-focused, behaviors reflecting unsuccessful preliminary empathy will be perceived as detrimental to the goal since goal-focused intent is best served by objective behavior. To be sure, further social interaction will be some function of the extent to which there is congruence between "intent" and actual behaviors in social stimulus situations. Postulates three and four are presented below.

Postulate 3: Other's perceived communicate effectiveness will be a function of the "degree of fit" between other's intent in interaction and actor's behavior.

3a. Other's intent may be goal-focused.

3b. Other's intent may be socio-emotionally oriented.

3b₁ Other's intent may be oriented toward positive socio-emotional interaction.

3b₂ Other's intent may be oriented toward negative socio-emotional interaction.

Postulate 4: Further social interaction between "actor" and "other" will be dependent, in part, on the perceived effectiveness of previous communication from both actor and other's points of view.

Theorems which can be logically derived from the preceding postulates are presented below.

THEOREMS

1. Given social interaction between actor and other, an increase in actor's positive or negative affect for other leads to an increase in actor's emission of sympathetic or negative behavior toward other.
2. Controlling for decreases in actor's secondary empathy, the above relationship disappears.
3. If other's intent in social interaction is goal-focused, then an increase in actor's sympathetic behavior leads to a decrease in other's perceived communication effectiveness.
4. If other's intent in social interaction is goal-focused, then increases in actor's negative behavior lead to decreases in other's perceived communication effectiveness.
5. If other's intent in social interaction is socio-emotional, then increases in actor's sympathetic behavior lead to increases in other's perceived communication effectiveness.
6. If other's intent in social interaction is socio-emotional, then increases in actor's negative behavior lead to decreases in other's perceived communication effectiveness.
7. If other's intent in social interaction is goal-focused, then increases in actor's behavior toward neutrality lead to increases in other's perceived communication effectiveness.
8. If other's intent in social interaction is socio-emotional, then further instances of interaction between actor and other will be a function, in part, of the extent to which actor emits sympathetic behavior.
9. Controlling for other's perceived communication effectiveness, the above relationship disappears.
10. If other's intent in social interaction is goal-focused, then further instances of interaction between actor and other will be a function, in part, of the extent to which actor emits affectively neutral behavior.
11. Controlling for other's perceived communication effectiveness, the above relationship disappears.
12. If actor maintains affective neutrality in a social relationship with other, there will be an increase in his emission of objective behavior.

13. Controlling for increases in secondary empathy, the above relationship disappears.
14. If other's intent in social interaction is goal-focused, then an increase in actor's secondary empathy will lead to an increase in other's perceived communication effectiveness.
15. Controlling for actor's emission of objective behavior, the above relationship disappears.
16. If other's intent in social interaction is socio-emotional, then an increase in actor's secondary empathy will lead to a decrease in other's perceived communication effectiveness.
17. Controlling for actor's emission of objective behavior, the above relationship disappears.

Theoretical and Research Implications

The theoretical formulation and scheme presented questions some traditional ideas concerning the role of empathy in the social interaction process. (1) Empathy has been delineated into two types; preliminary and secondary. (2) Empathy is not posited as a variable necessary for perceived communication effectiveness. (3) Affectivity is posited as an important intervening variable in perceived communication effectiveness.

The typology presented, unlike others, offers mutually exclusive conceptions of stages of empathy and posits intervening variables which can interact with preliminary empathy, thus affecting both secondary empathy and the resultant behaviors of the actor. Within the theoretical framework presented here, empathy is a more clearly defined concept, free of confusing definitional links with other similar concepts. This framework also makes possible the clear explication of the relationship between communication and empathy.

Until now it has been assumed that effective empathy yields effective communication. Based on the empathy-communication scheme presented here, it is quite likely that communication will be perceived effective as a result of affectivity rather than empathy (rows 2 and 8 of figure 1). In fact, perceived communication effectiveness may be impeded by secondary

empathy if "other's" intent in social interaction is socio-emotional. Secondary empathy, being cognitive and objective, would not enhance other's perceived communication effectiveness since affectivity would be lessened, thereby opposing "other's" intent in interaction. In such a situation the actor would perceive the other's intent, but since actor's intent is not socio-emotional he is less constrained to gratify other's intent by emitting affectively laden behavior.

In terms of future research, rules of correspondence between nominal and operational definitions of empathy should be much more explicit and result in the development of more valid and more reliable measures of empathy. Additionally, sympathy assumes its rightful role in social interaction theory and should play an integral part in future research studies related to interpersonal relations. Because empathy has been conceptually linked to effective communication, it is believed that this paper offers a challenge not only to its authors, but to others who utilize the assumption, to either provide evidence for this hypothesis or dispense with its use in theoretical formulations. To be sure, our hunch is that the relationships predicted by the paradigm presented here will have much more external validity than traditional notions concerning the relationship between empathy and communication.

While there is certain to be some opposition to the ideas which have been presented, we hope that scientific zeal and openness will prevail. This implies that traditional theoretical and research strategies, which have produced slightly under 50% explained variance,⁶ will be re-evaluated in light of the theoretical ideas advanced by this manuscript.

Figure 1

EMPATHY-COMMUNICATION SEQUENCE

Actor's Initial Cognitive Response to Other	Actor's Affectivity	Secondary Empathy	Actor's Behavior	Other's Orientation	Other's Perceived Effectiveness of Communication	Implications For Future Interaction
1. Unsuccessful preliminary empathy	positive	unsuccessful	sympathetic	goal-focused	moderate effectiveness	moderate probability
2. Unsuccessful preliminary empathy	positive	unsuccessful	sympathetic	socio-emotional	high effectiveness	high probability
3. Unsuccessful preliminary empathy	neutral	unsuccessful	neutral (objective)	goal-focused	moderate effectiveness	moderate probability
4. Unsuccessful preliminary empathy	neutral	unsuccessful	neutral (objective)	socio-emotional	low effectiveness	low probability
5. Unsuccessful preliminary empathy	negative	unsuccessful	hostile	goal-focused	low effectiveness	low probability
6. Unsuccessful preliminary empathy	negative	unsuccessful	hostile	socio-emotional	low effectiveness	low probability
7. Successful preliminary empathy	positive	unsuccessful	sympathetic	goal-focused	moderate effectiveness	moderate probability
8. Successful preliminary empathy	positive	unsuccessful	sympathetic	socio-emotional	high effectiveness	high probability
9. Successful preliminary empathy	neutral	successful	neutral (objective)	goal-focused	high effectiveness	high probability
10. Successful preliminary empathy	neutral	successful	neutral (objective)	socio-emotional	moderate effectiveness	moderate probability
11. Successful preliminary empathy	negative	unsuccessful	hostile	goal-focused	low effectiveness	low probability
12. Successful preliminary empathy	negative	unsuccessful	hostile	socio-emotional	low effectiveness	low probability

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Footnotes

1. Herbert Blumer explicitly stated his case against current theoretical and methodological strategies in 1954 and 1956. More recently (1969) a collection of his essays has been published with additional emphasis on the need for imagery building in sociology. Furthermore, Garfinkel (1967) and Wilson (1970) implicitly call for more in-depth study of social phenomena and less mechanistic treatment of substantive issues in the discipline.
2. Numerous writers have utilized the empathy concept without questioning the legitimacy of the nominal definition.
3. Their discussion of "raw" empathy implied that perhaps the concept was significantly related to the variable of similarity between the Actor and Other, and that empathic ability scores may be a spurious function of projection. Crucial here is the fact that there is an implicit acceptance of Dymond's original definition.
4. See also Dymond, 1948, 1950; Hastorf and Bender, 1955, 1958; Hobart and Falberg, 1965.
5. See for example, Brofenbrenner, et al. (1958). They offered an explanation of empathy involving a typology. The first type was labeled "sensitivity to the generalized other," which is defined as "an awareness of the social norm or the typical response of a large class or group." A good deal of similarity exists between this type of empathy and "preliminary empathy" as conceived in this paper. The second type of empathy is referred to as "sensitivity to individual differences or interpersonal sensitivity." Additionally, the authors state that the appraisal of

public opinion, show business, etc. are all good roles for persons with particular skills in the first type of empathy, while skill in the second type of empathy facilitates roles such as labor mediation and face-to-face diplomatic activities among others.

The problem with this approach is that the first type of empathy is necessary for those instances of social interaction which according to their typology would be encompassed by the second type of empathy. In essence, the contribution of Brofenbrenner and his associates does not serve to clarify empathy, nor does it account adequately for contradictory findings in the literature.

6. See, among others, studies by Kirkpatrick and Hobart, 1954; Crow and Hammond, 1957; Cline and Richards, 1960, and Goodman and Ofshe, 1968.